

How to Worship like the Angels

Mark Mullery¹

Part 1: Who Is Worthy?

“To boldly go where no man has gone before.”

With these stirring words, Captain Kirk and the crew of the USS Enterprise blasted off toward worlds unknown on *Star Trek*. The crew encountered strange and fascinating adventures, and through our imaginations, so did we, the television viewers. But when each episode ended, we always returned to earth. After all, this was only a TV show.

Have you ever thought of the last book of the Bible as an adventure story? It is—a real one. The apostle John goes “where no man has gone before,” encountering a spectacle that far surpasses any Hollywood fantasy.

In a revelation given by God, John sees a door open to heaven itself. He enters wide-eyed. Chapter four of this adventure takes John deep into the center of all things. There, seated upon a magnificent throne, appears the Lord God Almighty, “the object of heaven’s worship,” the One who is Holy! Holy! Holy!

In God’s hand rests a mysterious book, or scroll, with writing on both sides and fastened with seals. John hears an angel loudly proclaim, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” (Rev 5:1)

Who, indeed?

Then commences a thorough examination of all men, all women, and all heavenly beings: Moses? David? Peter? Mary? Augustine? Luther? The angels Gabriel or Michael? Each is scrutinized to find one, just one, worthy to open the scroll. Who knows how long this took. Perhaps nanoseconds. Perhaps years. But the outcome of the search is disheartening: no one is found worthy. John, devastated, breaks into loud weeping, his body convulsing with sorrow. Why such an extreme reaction? What’s the big deal about this book?

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Remember that Revelation is theology-by-picture. Instead of straightforward verbal truth (as in the book of Romans), here is truth clothed in symbolism. And the symbolic importance of the scroll is massive. This isn't just any old book. As one commentator puts it, this book is "best understood as God's plan of judgment and redemption, which has been set in motion by Christ's death and resurrection, but has yet to be completed." William Hendriksen explains, "If the scroll is not opened it means that there will be no protection for God's children in the hours of bitter trial; no judgments upon a persecuting world; no ultimate triumph for believers; no new heaven and new earth; no future inheritance."

If the book remains unopened, God's plan remains unfulfilled. John weeps because mankind appears doomed.

But amid despair, great news is announced. A worthy one has been found! He is a conqueror who is able to open the scroll and break its seals. Who is he? The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David—none other than Jesus Christ. John's sorrow instantly turns to joy, and he looks up to behold this worthy one, this conquering Lion.

What he sees astonishes him. As John looks to the throne, he encounters, not a powerful, victorious lion, but a lamb.

In their natural state, lambs are cuddly creatures, thoroughly non-intimidating. We say "gentle as a lamb" or "meek as a lamb," but not "mighty as a lamb."

Football teams might be called the Lions or the Bears, but never the Lambs. Yet here the worthy one is revealed as a lamb. Moreover, he is a Lamb who appears to have been tortured and killed—made a bloody sacrifice. John instantly realizes that this Lamb had once been dead. Were there bloodstains? Wounds from flogging? Evidences of crucifixion? Whatever it was, John realizes in a moment that this Lamb had been slain—but now was very much alive.

Using the fast-changing symbolism of apocalyptic literature, John tells us that the Lion who has conquered is also the Lamb who was slain. We move closer to get a better glimpse of this Lamb. As we do so, we notice additional details.

The Lamb has seven horns with seven eyes. What does this mean? Recall that in Scripture, seven represents completeness (e.g., the earth was formed completely in seven days). Horns represent power and strength. Eyes represent knowledge, the ability to perceive. In short, the Lamb is all-powerful and omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient.

The Lamb is worthy because the Lamb is God.

The only one worthy to break the seals is Jesus: the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God, the Second Person of the Trinity.

Part 2: His Worthiness Lies in His Humiliation

John the Apostle's revelation of heaven took him to the very throne of God. Once there, he sees a Lamb who takes a scroll out of God's hand. Then four living creatures and 24 elders around the throne break into worship. Listen carefully to what they say:

“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.” (Rev 5:9–10)

Why is the Lamb worthy? Is it his wise teaching ministry? His breathtaking signs, wonders, and miracles? Is it his perfect obedience compared to our sinfulness? His completely unselfish love for people? Do those around the throne draw attention to his limitless power or his endless knowledge?

No, those around the throne of God draw attention to the Lamb's death. “Worthy are you...for you were slain.” Author Graeme Goldsworthy puts it this way: “John illuminates the central paradox of the gospel. The victory of God was the humiliation and death of his Son. The Lion assumes the meekness of the Lamb and dies in order to overcome.”

Yes, the Lion has conquered—but as a lamb. The Lamb is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals because he died on a cross. Does this surprise you? It should. This is the complete opposite of how our world works. Who wins the award for being the most valuable player? Who is picked as salesman of the year? Who receives the Nobel Prize? It's always those who excel, whose accomplishments and performance enable them to outpace their peers.

So why is Jesus selected here above all others? He wasn't rich like Abraham or strong like Samson or a great military general like David. He didn't lead two million people like Moses or oversee churches on several continents like Paul. He died a slave's death on a cross, an instrument of humiliation and torture. He was rejected by the religious leaders of his own people. He was executed by the representative of Rome. People saw him as a joke, a failure, a loser.

Why is he worthy? Because the victory of God was the humiliation of his Son. Because when he was slaughtered like a Passover lamb, Jesus' blood paid the ransom price to free men and women from their bondage to sin. Through his death on a cross Jesus purchased men for God. Moses couldn't do this, nor David, nor Paul. No human had the ability. When it came to this task only the God-man, Jesus Christ, could do what was required.

The Lamb who was slain is worthy to be worshiped. What does this tell us about God? First, he is mightily impressed with his Son. The Son of God towers over all creation. There is no one mighty, meek, and honored like him. Let us join God in being impressed with his Son!

Second, let us take careful note of the centrality of the cross in the history of the world. We're told of Jesus' great power and knowledge, but ultimately our attention rests on his humiliating death on a cross. Here is God's evaluation of history. It is focused on the cross, the place where Christ died in the place of sinners like you and me.

Part 3: The Example of Heavenly Worship

As we continue our adventure in the book of Revelation, all of heaven is breaking out into song—in fact, three songs. The first is sung to the Lamb, the second is sung about the Lamb, and the third to both the Lamb and to God Almighty, seated on his throne.

When Jesus takes the scroll, there is a strong response in heaven. It's not like our response when people do something great—standing, cheering, and applauding. John says that those who are nearby in heaven, the four living creatures and the 24 elders, fall to the ground in an act of worship. Worship is the only proper response to the Lamb who was slain.

They also sing a song filled with deep theological content. They sing about atonement, redemption, and the kingdom of God. Their song speaks of eschatology (the doctrine concerning final things), evangelism, and the priesthood of believers. This is, we are told, a new kind of song.

Chapter four pictures these living creatures and elders in perpetual, blissful worship. Their songs speak of God's holiness and worthiness as the Creator of all things. No doubt these 28 individuals had quite an extensive list of high-quality worship songs at their disposal. Yet, when Jesus Christ is revealed as the Lamb who was slain, no song on any other topic is adequate. Something new must be created.

Like fire in a dry pine forest, this worship spreads and can't be stopped. Next to be caught up are angels—too many to count. They sing with a loud voice:

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom
and might and honor and glory and blessing!” (Rev 5:12)

Notice that the angels begin the same way as the elders, by declaring that the Lamb is worthy and pointing to his death. Do you see how the cross is crucial to their worship? Do you see, also, that they are vigorous in their worship, singing with loud voices and falling down?

Is not our Savior worthy of such songs? Is he not worthy of songs full of doctrinal content, meaning, and truth? Is he not worthy of songs that tax the greatest brains on earth to put into words his horrible humiliation and wonderful exaltation? Is the Lamb not worthy of loud songs sung with passion, emotion, and affection? If he is not praised this way, won't the very rocks cry out to make up for our lack? Let us never apologize for loud worship if it comes from hearts overwhelmed by the glories of the Lamb who was slain.

The blazing worship around the throne continues to attract others. John tells us that at the completion of the second song he “heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them” (Rev 5:13). They all join in with a song of their own:

“To him who sits on the throne
and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory
and might forever and ever!” (Rev 5:13)

Imagine a chorus in which every creature who ever lived worships God Almighty and his Son, the Lamb! Imagine the sound!! This extraordinary chorus includes not only all who love and fear God, but also all his opponents. Will we see Pilate here? Nero? Hitler? Mohammed? Satan? That is the implication. If so, this is similar to Philippians 2:10–11, where we are told that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord.

Previously, no one could be found worthy to open the scroll. Now no one can be found who will not acknowledge the perfections and praiseworthiness of the Lamb. This is true corporate worship! The scene closes with an “Amen!” and then describes the Lamb opening the scroll and how God's plan for judgment and redemption is carried to its fearsome completion.

Part 4: Lessons from the Heavenly Worship

Who is worthy? The Lamb. Why is he worthy? Because he was slain. How must we respond? With thunderous worship! Worship is what you do when you see the Lamb who was slain. This is why we must preach the gospel to ourselves each day, so that we might see him afresh and worship him anew. This is why our preaching must be Christ-centered and cross-centered, so that our churches will be filled with people ready to respond with worship to the Lamb.

Chapter five of the book of Revelation has much to say about our times of corporate worship. There are six implications, and here are the first three:

1. Their worship is responsive.

God has made human beings to respond in appropriate ways. Remember where you were on 9/11 when you heard about the terrorist attacks? Remember how you felt and responded? I remember hearing gasping followed by stunned silence. We are also designed to respond to the magnificence of God—and specifically to our awareness of the cross—with songs of praise and thanksgiving. What do Christians do when we see the Lamb who was slain? Worship is what we do. We never initiate worship, or make the first move toward God. He created us, revealed himself to us, redeemed us, and awakened us to the gospel. Now it's our turn to respond. When we come to God in times of corporate worship we're coming not to initiate something but to respond to him.

2. Their worship is loud and continuous.

This is a loud chapter. The angel who asks "Who is worthy?" does so with a loud voice. John weeps loudly. The worship brought to the throne is loud. That's an understatement, I'm sure—the worship is thunderous! It is also ceaseless. Chapters four and five describe the activity around the throne with phrases such as "day and night they never cease to say..." (Rev 4:8). The elders fall down before the throne repeatedly (4:10; 5:8; 5:14). This is just a way of saying that worship is a way of life. So for us, times of corporate worship are opportunities to bring songs of praise to our Savior. The remainder of our lives is an opportunity to obey our Savior. Both times are worship.

3. Their worship is God-centered.

Many popular worship songs start with the word "I." Now, there's nothing inherently wrong here, if, in starting with ourselves, we finish by looking up to God. But there is always a danger in becoming man-centered in our worship, so that when we're finished singing we're more aware of ourselves than of him. In Revelation, there is no danger of that. "Worthy are you...you were slain...you have made them."

If we step back and look at the whole of Revelation 4 and 5, we find that humanity is unimpressive at best, and more often irrelevant. If you accept, as I do, that these elders are not human at all, but angelic governors, then people don't really get into the act here until the very last song (noting, of course, that it was for people that the Lamb died).

You see, this chapter isn't about men; it's about the Lamb who was slain. Once you grasp this, you've grasped the key to understanding the whole book of Revelation. You don't need a secret decoder ring to understand this book: it's the revelation of Jesus Christ. It's from him and about him. He's the center.

Part 5: Final Lessons from the Heavenly Worship

Worship is the natural response to God for his marvelous gift of salvation. Worship can be loud and continuous—we can worship God all the time, by singing his praises and living a life in obedience to him. Also, proper worship is all about God, not about man.

Here are the final three implications about worship that we learn from the book of Revelation:

1. Their worship is truth-saturated

We've touched on this earlier, but it is worth noting again how much content is in these songs. We have songs to the Creator (chapter 4), to the Redeemer (chapter 5), and to both. These songs are brief but packed with theological content. They revolve around God as sovereign Lord of history, the only one who can hold and open the scroll. If you write songs, do you aspire to fill them with content such as you see here?

2. Their worship is grounded in the gospel.

How can we keep the cross from becoming a buzzword, devoid of meaning, weightless upon our souls? Let us be inspired by this passage where the word "cross" never appears but where the doctrine of the atonement is front and center. Ponder these words: *Lamb, slain, blood, purchase, throne*. If you lead worship in your church, evaluate the songs you sing to make sure that they are rooted in the gospel.

3. Their worship is comforting to the saints.

One problem with many modern interpretations of the book of Revelation is that, in tying its interpretation tightly to modern political events, it rips it from its historical context, making it pretty much useless to all who came before us. Yet this book was written to

real saints in real cities such as Smyrna and Pergamum and Ephesus. They were in the middle of trials and in significant danger.

It is likely that this book was written toward the end of the reign of Emperor Domitian, who liked to be called “lord and god,” and who persecuted Christians. Consider what would happen in your heart as you sat in first-century Smyrna and heard this letter read to you for the first time. Wouldn’t it be comforting to know that the one who holds the scroll isn’t Domitian, but Jesus? Wouldn’t you be strengthened when you realize that your trials are temporary, but worship around the throne is endless? Wouldn’t it promote endurance in your life to be reminded that the seat of power isn’t Rome but the throne in heaven? Wouldn’t it encourage you to know that everything in heaven is in order and that one day everything on earth will be brought into the same order? When we worship, we’re reminded of the way things really are in heaven and one day will be universally.

The book of Revelation teaches us to worship Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was slain for our sins. Center your songs on Jesus alone, and have a wonderful time worshipping around the throne!